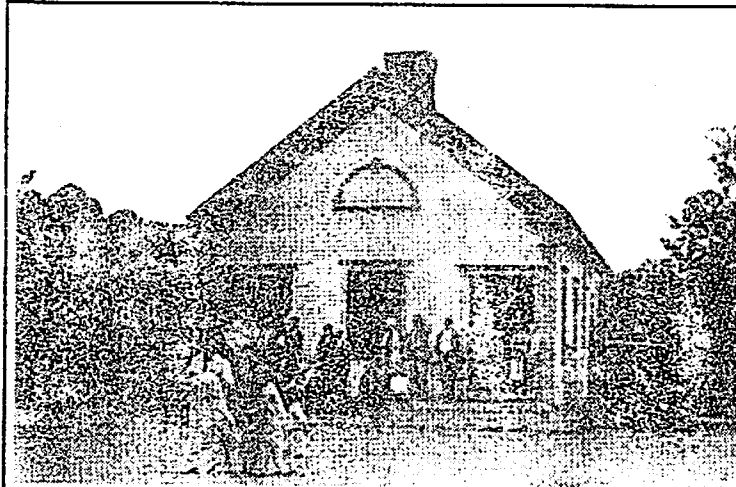


Tarkiln Twin Schoolhouse is a Legacy to Preserve

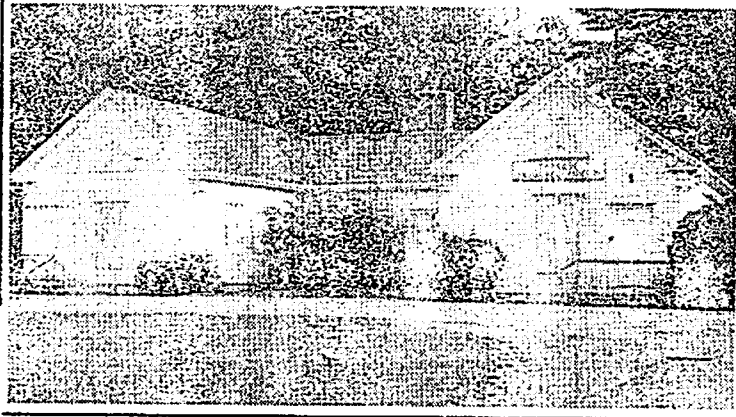
By ANN PRINCE

A one-room schoolhouse is an indelible symbol of the Massachusetts landscape, as well as our state's leading role in education throughout the nation. In fact, upon the recommendation of the Court of Massachusetts, the country's first schoolhouses were built here in 1647. For local conservationists saving a town's oldest schoolhouse from demolition is analogous to retaining the last remaining forestland forever as open space or conserving a family farm in perpetuity so it will never become a subdivision.

As many organizations such as The Trustees of Reservations and Preservation Massachusetts recognize, endeavors of this kind safeguard a town's cultural heritage, economic well-being, and environmental integrity.



Tarkiln was built in 1871 as a one-room schoolhouse and an adjacent school building was constructed next door in 1908. The two were connected in 1926. Today, the building stands in disrepair.



Throughout the US, people are working to save the last of these historic icons, many of them one-room schoolhouses that have fallen into disrepair but often are never-the-less structurally sound thanks to high-quality, old-fashioned methods of construction. These centers of learning served relatively small sections in towns, drawing children living in surrounding homesteads and farmhouses. Each a magnificent structure in its own way, the quintessential schoolhouse stood alone on the land—its simple beauty enhancing the countryside. The classic design was a basic one-story rectangle with tall windows to let in natural light, wide wood floors, a gable front and back, and often two separate doors for boys and girls at the front and perhaps a bell tower on the roof. They were solidly

framed and covered with wooden clapboards often painted red, white, or yellow; or built of brick or even local stone in some regions.

"The one-room schoolhouses that remain in the US, tucked away in groves, adjacent to cemeteries, or competing with suburban sprawl, are the vestiges of our citizens' belief in the American Dream," says retired schoolteacher and administrator Susan Fineman, who is on the board of the Country School Association of America. "They deserve to be preserved the same as our documents of freedom and our battlefields. Within these walls, generations of schoolchildren were honed to be literate and good citizens [through] the efforts

of thousands of selfless teachers...."

Hundreds of one-room schoolhouses once dotted the state, accommodating the children in many small quarters of official townships—something like the voting precincts of today. But now most are gone: a result of sprawl, neglect, and obsolescence. They lost their original purpose once towns consolidated a half-century ago—instituting fewer, larger schools.

In the twenty-first century, when there is growing pressure to raze the last holdouts of a prominent era, fortunately there is also an opportunity for land conservationists and historic preservationists to unite, not only to save these priceless historic treasures but also the adjacent land that they occupy.

One such treasure is the Tarkiln Twin Schoolhouse, on Summer Street in Duxbury, which opened in 1871 in school district four on the westerly side of town. Most of the families in this section were farmers growing vegetables, running dairies, and raising poultry. The shipbuilding industry on the eastern side of this coastal town was declining during that time period, though fisheries were still thriving. A building that mirrored the initial school for elementary students was added in 1908 as a grammar school for older children; and eventually the twin one-room schools were connected in 1926. This "double" schoolhouse is unique; instead of standing alone, the Tarkiln Twins are side by side.

A Duxbury native remembers eating PEP wheat flakes cereal with O'Neil Farm milk for breakfast, then walking to Tarkiln for school in the 1930s. Among her favorite activities were recess on the back ballfield and listening to the Nutcracker Suite on the victrola. Not only did she attend Tarkiln but her mother, aunts and uncles, brother, and cousins did as well. Her great aunt Triphosia Peterson taught at Tarkiln in the 1890s; and no doubt her ancestors, fishmongers and farmers, helped build Tarkiln in 1871.

The town report of 1931 described Tarkiln as by far the oldest school in town, and now, 75 years later, miraculously, it endures. It was once one of thirteen such schoolhouses in Duxbury, but only one other survives to this day. A few farms from the Tarkiln community have also persisted—Bongi's Turkey Farm across the road and the 145-acre O'Neil Dairy Farm a half-mile to the west. And lovely antique homes still line portions of Summer Street, which was the main route to Boston before Route 3 was constructed. Thus, much of the rural character of the western side of town abides; and the schoolhouse and the landscape it occupies are an essential element.

Tarkiln served as a community center for townspeople after it closed as a school in the 1950s. It is the center-

piece of a six-acre parcel that includes historic ball fields still in great demand for little league games; the best public tennis courts in town, shaded by tall oaks and pines; and a pretty second-growth woodland. The town of Duxbury is fortunate to own this sanctuary in the midst of the dense subdivisions in the vicinity. The complex is a rest for the eyes and a center of recreation and creativity.

According to an architectural report by Menders, Torrey, & Spencer: "Nearly a hundred years of active service as a school followed by some fifty years as a community center have left its toll. Yet the very lack of modernization may have contributed to [Tarkiln's] preservation.... The good news is that the building [is] structurally sound."

In affirming the building and land as eligible for the National Historic Register, the Massachusetts Historical Society's Karen Davis indicated: "The Tarkiln School is significant as a good example of a Greek Revival-style one room schoolhouse that was expanded in the early twentieth century. The building exemplifies Duxbury's commitment to educating its youngsters.... It retains integrity of design, location, setting, materials, feeling, workmanship, and association."

The application for nomination of the entire six-acre site—including the schoolhouse, ballfields, and open space—for the National Historic Register is now in process. The US National Park Service will make the final determination. Yet, even when this prominent status is attained, ultimately it will take a continued commitment by citizens, administrators, and supporters to ensure Tarkiln's future. Tarkiln Twin Schoolhouse and its adjacent property have been alive with activity for 136 years. They have graced the landscape with their charm. Restoration and preservation will secure this legacy for generations to come.

Ann Prince is associate editor of Sanctuary. She worked as a naturalist for the first five years. This article was reprinted with permission.